

DOUBLE TALK AND DOUBLE VISION

It is an honor to give the prestigious Hopwood Lecture, but I confess I was spooked by its cocktail of celebration, ceremony, charge to the troops and preaching to the choir. Might we not find it ironic that the person installed at such a public podium spends her best energies reading and writing poems, that solitary, subversive, and “perfectly useless” art?

You might also find it ironic that irony is my topic, since I am essentially an earnest person—as you can deduce from my confession. But I suspect earnestness is my chief qualification, and I suspect we may not yet agree on what is meant by “ironic,” that ubiquitous adjective in the language of our current culture.

My interest is in the irony found in poems, and thus the two-sided coin of my title, double talk and double vision. Their common element is a discrepancy between what seems to be the case and what is the case, a purposeful ambiguity, a corrective to over-simplified inference. And yes, this is reasonably characteristic of all literature; and yes, an inherent ambiguity is also characteristic of language, of all utterance. And yes, alas, we now label “ironic” anything that surprises us, which these days arrives pretty much all the time. As Wayne Booth noted in his encyclopedic study *A Rhetoric of Irony*, forty years ago, “irony has to come to stand for so many things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether.” For my update, I’ll need to begin not with my coin but with the currency of our moment: an ironic style.

Here’s a description of that style I came across recently: “Appearing to be blasé—indifferent, relaxed, casual, unconcerned. . . .” Let me cue up the soundtrack; I’m thinking

The Hopwood Lecture, 2009.

Stephen Sondheim, early-to-middle Sondheim. I won't sing it—I'm not *that* earnest—but you can hum it to yourself, or most of you can:

Isn't it rich?
 Aren't we a pair?
 Me here at last on the ground,
 You in mid-air.
 Send in the clowns.
 There ought to be clowns.

Sondheim's metaphor plays out the reversal of expectations—I thought that you'd want what I want—and provides his first doubling.

In the 1973 musical drama *A Little Night Music*, this song appears in act 2. Updating Verdi's *La Traviata*, the aging, free-spirited actress Desiree has just slept with a former lover, now married to a sexually withholding young woman, and has let herself imagine a future with him. When she learns he is in fact totally smitten with the virginal wife, that humiliating reversal of expectation compels the "double talk" of the song: Desiree is really really pissed, but since she has already made a fool of herself, she doesn't want to also make a scene.

But Sondheim scores this song with the slow sweetness of a ballad. In its verses, he uses only three chords—I-IV-V-I, the pattern of pop songs, folk songs, country music, and gospel, a long way from the gleeful, energetic, shifting modalities of his next project, *Sweeney Todd*, and a large disconnect from the decadent plot and setting. This harmonic backdrop is as sincere, direct, and full of simplified feeling as possible, even as its meter is duplicitous: first 9/8—we hear the three strong beats of a waltz in the questions (almost all of the songs in this musical are waltzes)—but then 12/8, giving us an extra fourth beat in the measure and a longer pause bisecting the clown refrain. So at least four doublings: within the rhythmic patterns, within the lyrics, between the rhythm and the harmony, and between the song itself and the rest of the play.

But there's also a subsequent, circumstantial irony, what Booth calls the irony of event: the song was soon plucked from its dramatic context, and in the voice of Judy Collins its sup-

pressed outrage and bitterness were replaced by futility, a sweet sigh of regret. And then, in the patented stylization of Frank Sinatra, it became a shrug, a wry deflection in those interrogatives: the world will break your heart; get over it. Instead of weeping, "Send in the clowns."

In other words, an ironic style. In the compressed definition I quoted earlier, the hallmark of that style is "appearing to be blasé—indifferent, relaxed, casual, unconcerned." What links the style to my coin, to both double talk and double vision, is the word *appearing*: irony involves a discrepancy between how things seem and what, we learn, they are. But there's something else—something intentional. The full quotation is this: "Appearing to be blasé—indifferent, relaxed, casual, unconcerned—was protective coloration." The sentence is from an account of the family life of three brothers who grew up to be published writers, written by the two who survived the deaths of the more famous older brother and then their father, went on a gambling binge, and lost \$250,000.

I have the quotation by way of Louis Menand in a recent review. His focus is not our current moment, nor the mid-1990s when the brothers had their fling, but decades earlier, just before *A Little Night Music* opened on Broadway. Irony itself, however, as distinct from ironic style, has a vastly more ancient history. The root of the word is the Greek *eironeia*, meaning *dissembling*. An archetype in Greek comedy, the *eirone* was the underdog, the weakling, foil to the *alazon*, a puffed-up braggart. In comedy, the *eirone* shuffles or grovels or in general acts goofy and harmless but triumphs at the end, proving superior wits and wit. Br'er Rabbit, from Cherokee and African tales, is an *eirone*, defeating the large, clumsy, clueless bear and the self-important fox every time. Although this trickster figure outwits his nemesis in hundreds of cartoons—Tom and Jerry, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd—*comedy* doesn't necessarily mean funny or amusing; it does mean a concluding alignment with how things *should* be, the world set right. The surprise, the irony, is in the source—Chaplin's little tramp, let's say, or Huck Finn, who has greater moral clarity than anyone else in that book.

Here's how some of this has trickled down, into the cultural reservoir that collects the run-off: how "ironic" that our first minority President takes the oath of office on the marble steps

of a building constructed by slaves. Or, try this: how "ironic" if the next day, the first black US Attorney General is mistaken for a waiter in the Capitol dining room and asked for a little more coffee. In other words, the reversal can be a *betrayal*—y happened instead of x, which seems to our moral sense simply wrong. Instead of relief or optimism, what we feel is outrage, for which there may be no safe or adequate form of expression. That is the pressure behind a variety of literary strategies which developed for tragedy, not comedy, and are usually categorized as dramatic irony. Each strategy provides some slightly different angle on who knows what and when they know it. The reader may know something the protagonist does not know (think *Oedipus Rex*); the protagonist may act in a way that seems inappropriate or unwise (think *Hamlet*); the protagonist may be dissembling—lying—to himself (think *King Lear*); or the protagonist may be so earnest as to misread or disregard every signal given by the world (think *Don Quixote*). Irony then becomes expressed in the narrative or dramatic structure.

In literature, the dissembling, the discrepancy between what something seems to be and what it actually is, can also take the form of verbal irony. This is a set of strategies that includes understatement, overstatement (hyperbole), parody, and conscious naiveté. "Please *please*," says the rabbit, "please don't throw me into the briar patch," which of course is exactly what he hopes will happen—what needs to happen for his survival. We know that, but Br'er Bear and Br'er Fox never will.

For classical rhetoricians, the speaker is always aware of the double meanings but the listener is not: a reversal comes when the light bulb clicks on over our heads. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* says this is what distinguishes irony from sarcasm, in which both parties understand the double meaning, but that distinction seems to me insufficient. Sarcasm is a subset of mockery: it sets out to sneer, to belittle, and it is aggressive toward another while irony is not. In normal discourse, a shared situational context surrounds most instances of verbal irony and provides the discrepancy, the doubling, the reversed meaning. When I go to the post office in Vermont, and it's blowing snow outside and ten below, and the postmaster says "Warm enough for you?" his under-

statement is playful, making a bond between us with the obvious joke. Or, when the mother says to her child who has dashed out into the busy street, "If you get run over by a car, I'm going to kill you," the hyperbole does not seek to disguise her feeling of terror but to express it. What's at work in both examples is disproportion.

In order to register a disproportion, a discrepancy, we need a fixed point against which to measure it. Unlike literature, the public sphere doesn't always provide one. And if there is no fixed point—if mothers actually do kill their children right and left because they can't take the irritation, if government torture is defended with a shrug, if those in authority lie without compunction—if the previously stable ground is itself deceptive, it may be hard to distinguish between "conscious naiveté" and the unconscious kind (quick: which was Forrest Gump?), or between parody and literal reporting (just ask Stewart and Colbert). In literature, we rely on tone for those distinctions; in life, increasingly we need emoticons.

Or, since in life we experience betrayal more often than moral corrective—the wise fool so seldom triumphs—we may just avoid such signals entirely, and instead adopt a default posture of distance and disengagement ("Whatever," as my son used to say), an ironic style in which double talk loses that imperative the slaves building the Capitol knew full well. In poetry, too, when ironic strategies no long provide a *revelatory* discrepant angle, complex feeling is replaced by cleverness. Worse: poets may doubt the possibility of any sort of meaning in the world, and content themselves with an allegedly mimetic presentation of disparate, even random fragments of observation and experience. As the loop closes, and the rut deepens from art to popular culture and back again, we may have started making stylish poems as shallow, and reductive, as the sentimentality they presumably guard against.

The problem with all received styles is this: by the time we can spot it, name it, wear it or drink it or eat it or drive it or dance it, or write it, we are already imitating the imitators, a very long way from the source and whatever compelled it in the first place—the style is no longer a responsive posture but a preemptive one. But one can resist the ironic *style* without rejecting irony. Here's a poem from 1936, one that predates the style:

The people along the sand
 All turn and look one way.
 They turn their back on the land.
 They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
 A ship keeps raising its hull;
 The wetter ground like glass
 Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
 But wherever the truth may be—
 The water comes ashore,
 And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
 They cannot look in deep.
 But when was that ever a bar
 To any watch they keep?

On the surface of this poem there is nary a shadow of a smudge of outrage, although we know from other poems and biography that Robert Frost had plenty: the mask is firmly in place. What it provides is the calmness and authority created by distance. Without supplying an identifiable "I" narrator, the poem focuses on a categorical plural, "the people" named twice and appearing five more times in the four quatrains as "they." We never learn what "they" feel, and we may not be sure what the poem feels either. It ends on a rhetorical question—"When was that ever a bar?" "Never" is the answer supplied by all those present tense verbs, the framing OCD (they look look look look—four times they're watching the inexpressive sea). Oh, these crazy, bone-headed, earnest people, the poem appears to say, inviting our distance from "them," this alien species awaiting some revelation. Poor humans: they cannot . . . they cannot. The syntax pretends to wisdom and disengagement—that is how it dissembles. It's an early version of the shrug, before the shoulders were frozen into that posture.

And yet, without looking elsewhere except at these four balanced, rhymed, metered, end-stopped stanzas, aren't we invited to remember the Shakespearean sonnet, in which the

argument of three quatrains can be undone—reversed or qualified—by a couplet? Also, to remember that “keeping the watch” has a history as a noble enterprise—even if there’s little to watch; even if one is facing the wrong direction? Bone-headed but also admirable—Frost isn’t saying the opposite of what he means, but saying and meaning two things at once, both true.

By the time he wrote this poem, Frost’s persona was firmly in place—not one of “them,” and not one of us either, but the shrewd, wise Yankee watching from the sidelines. That speaker is an invention, a way to package—to sell—an insight about the human dilemma, a paradox. What signals the doubling and clues us in tonally to what’s below the surface? As with *Sondheim*, Frost has scored this removed, observational utterance with the simplest possible chord progression, or a poet’s version of it, with so many end-stopped lines, the obvious rhymes, fixed three-beat meter, and simple declarative syntax. I hear echoes of an earlier prototype that sounds like this:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Emily Dickinson famously said that poetry should “Tell the truth but tell it slant”—at a discrepant angle. The first “dissembling” in her poem is that these two matched declarative sentences arrive in straightforward syntax, not slant at all. As in the Frost poem, we are given only third person pronouns—his remain plural, categorical, hers will become singular in the next stanza, yet in both cases no “I” emerges, no identifiable human speaker, sincere or insincere. But this doesn’t legislate indifference so much as the appearance of disinterest and authority.

Meanwhile, behind the similar syntax, meter, and alternating rhyme, Dickinson’s structural strategy is almost exactly opposite to Frost’s. He developed a single scene before delivering the summary and implicating interrogative. She flings paradox right onto the table in her opening two lines, pauses there with the end-stop period, then repeats the claim in two

more lines that match the first pair metrically and syntactically, the initial adjective ("sweetest") and subordinate clause ("those who ne'er succeed") reappearing as paired nouns, "a nectar" and a "need," as assertion is hammered in with an assertive verb—"requires." Again, full stop, and double stop, at the end of the rhymed stanza.

It's not hard to imagine a few more stanzas done up in the ironic style, a dark witty treatment of what we might call, thanks to Joseph Heller, the "catch-22" of success. But Dickinson doesn't shrug, and she's not joking. Instead, the third sentence—the remaining eight lines of the poem—develops an extended metaphor across the last two quatrains. Notice the shift between them:

Not one of all the purple Host
 Who took the Flag today
 Can tell the definition
 So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
 On whose forbidden ear
 The distant strains of triumph
 Burst agonized and clear!

In stanza 2, perhaps an athletic playing field with its colors and flag, and then the correction: no, a *battlefield*—and language at an opposite pole from blasé or casual. Six of the last sixteen words are modifiers, unambiguous and charged:

Defeated
 Dying
 Forbidden
 Distant
 Agonized
 Clear—

We can note their disproportion to the first assertions, in stanza 1, but which is the ground, which the discrepancy? Are the modifiers hyperbolic, the figure of the battlefield too exaggerated for normal envy and disappointment? Or, have we arrived at the true expression of feeling that retroactively casts the first two stanzas as understatement? If we can't tell, it

may be due in part to Dickinson's "protective coloration" for her skepticism, which was unconventional and unstylish in her time. But it may be also because the poem's figuration moves beyond the presentational doublings of strictly verbal irony, to a suggestive discrepancy between the initial tone of cool omniscience and the final tone of anguish.

Metaphor, then, is one solution to our current dilemma of unstable ground, without loss of complex, suggestive tone. Reading Dickinson's poem is not unlike looking at one of those fractal photographs—since we don't know what the photographer knows, we actually *experience* the similarity between desert topography and a woman's breast, or the wind patterns on a sand dune and the directional swirl of feathers on a bird's wing. The surprise or reversal in learning the source is instructive: it makes us a little less foolish, not more, having shown us congruence in the world we may not have previously noticed. Such is the power of metaphor, and why it is the cornerstone of poetry and of irony.

This is a long way from ironic style since the doubling exists within the evidence, not in performative response or preemptive protection. Irony here is a means to embody passionate feeling, and passionate feeling is what I claim outright as the default position for which, in literature, ironic strategies of indirect expression can provide a refraction and commentary. In the Dickinson poem, the "doubleness" we witness is not only within the utterance, between matter and manner, between the evidence and how it is presented—those triangulations—but within the evidence itself: not just double talk but double vision. Her poem does not contradict the prevailing meaning of success; we still have Rose Bowl champs and Rose Bowl losers, and winners and losers with much higher stakes on the battlefield. At the same time, we also have the distorting power of envy:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.

Non-Hopwood winners might bear in mind this little koan, as oxymoronic as *jumbo shrimp* and as true to human experience. And when you win the Pulitzer, you'll be prepared: your success will be less sweet for you than for those on whom the

news "breaks agonized and clear." This could strike you as "ironic." Or perhaps as something else, a grievance if not a grief.

Now I've given my earnest self away utterly: I have uttered the *T* word. As if you could still believe there is such a thing as "truth." As if you could still believe we could ever find it. And now is the time to acknowledge my own small dissembling. Menand's article, from which I harvested my definition of ironic style, is not very interested in 1996, when the grown-up brothers Barthelme had their spree, or even in those two particular Barthelmes and their "protective coloration." He's reviewing Tracy Daugherty's biography of the more famous older brother, Donald, a master of experimental anti-narrative, collage, fictions constructed of flat prose and indeterminate affect.

A master, that is, of irony—not merely the camouflage of an ironic style. In the midseventies, just after Sondheim had picked up his Pulitzer for *A Little Night Music*, Donald Barthelme said "that the goal of writing was access to the ineffable. 'I believe that's the place artists are trying to get to, and I further believe that when they are successful, they reach it . . . an area somewhere probably between mathematics and religion, in which what may fairly be called truth exists.'" This was public and earnest testimony ("I believe" is used twice) and it should not surprise anyone who reads his work carefully: Barthelme's commitment was to irony as a literary strategy, a means by which to discover and reveal, not a posture or defense.

The goal, of course, itself embodies a paradox: that the arts can express the inexpressible. It is what drives the narrative in another poem by Frost, also famous for his irony. While you hear it, keep in mind the pronouns of the earlier example, "the people" who "cannot look in deep":

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
 Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
 Deeper down in the well than where the water
 Gives me back in a shining surface picture
 Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
 Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud-puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,

I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
 Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
 Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
 Water came to rebuke the too clear water.

One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

If poetry is, as Yeats said, an argument with oneself, Frost has left enough traces for us to reconstruct the cross-examination:

Well, Robert, did you have a vision or did you not?

Yes and no.

Explain yourself.

"Once, I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture, through the picture. . . ."

Discerned what, Robert—what what what?

"A something white, uncertain, Something more of the depths."

And then? Was it design of darkness to appall? Does design govern in a thing so small?

"And then I lost it." It was blurred, blotted out by the ripple from a drop of water falling from a fern.

"It" is a slippery word, Br'er Robert. What exactly was "that whiteness?" "Truth?" or just "A pebble of quartz?"

He does not answer because he cannot know—the problem is epistemological, not merely linguistic, and is what gave rise to irony long, long before style precluded any glimpse of those origins. The polarity of the choices reflects not stylish understatement or camouflage but hyperbole and paradox, not the *opposite* of what one means but two things meant equally: perhaps truth, perhaps a stone. We're back inside the fractal photograph, the two options "proving," like congruent triangles, "a whiteness," that no-color color absorbing nothing, reflecting everything. "Beyond the picture, through the picture" of the observing and obscuring self, there was "for once, then, something."

The difference between Frost's irony in this poem and our current ironic style may be the delicate but important differ-

ence between skepticism and cynicism. In the opening lines of his poem, Frost's self-mockery is a strategy ("godlike," he says of himself, "in the summer heaven," with "a wreath of ferns and cloud-puffs"): it helps us accept the narrative occasion. When the language then eschews mockery, and verbal cleverness, and self-protection, how can we not accept as earnest the narrative event? Meanwhile, the entire poem, from first line to last, is metaphoric. The speaker kneeling at the "well-curb" is a figure for the poet puzzling over and through his page, trying to get past the "shining surface picture" of oneself to something deeper, something ineffable—the "goal of writing" articulated by Donald Barthelme. And the poet, in turn, is the figure for *us*. Concerned less with discrepancy than with dichotomy, less double talk than double vision, this is irony aligned with mystery and a shared human dilemma, Prometheus still bound to his bloody rock.

Preparing this talk, I easily collected a whole notebook of contemporary uses of the term "irony." But twice in the past seven years, I have also come across predictions that we have reached the end of the "Age of Irony." The first time was just after 9/11: distance and disengagement seemed a callow, even toxic, response, suggesting not irony, with its doubling, but cynicism with its dangerous oversimplifications. The second time, from Joan Didion (Queen of Irony) and others, was after the 2008 Election, when unabashed celebration broke out in Grant Park; New York City; Cabot, Vermont; Kenya; and Iraq; often coupled with distinctly nonironic tears. What links the two occasions is the most direct public expression of overt emotion, in a political-civil-communal context, since the political assassinations of the 1960s.

And nothing rots so quickly as yesterday's style. As Garrison Keillor—whom we so hope is ironic rather than cynical—announced this winter, "sincerity is the new irony." Perhaps you watched the recent Academy Awards, when we were given not the familiar parody of the song-and-dance routine by Billy Crystal or Ellen DeGeneres, but three actual song-and-dance routines, when the award presenters didn't chat with slick brittleness among themselves (appearing to be blasé, indifferent, *cool*) but addressed the nominees with "heartfelt" scripted tributes, when the Oscar for Best Picture went to the singing and dancing poor of India.

But what these signals chart is only *style*. There is no end to irony, not as long as moral certainty remains absent—devoutly to be wished but, finally, absent. And for a writer, of course, the one style that matters is the one he or she must forge from individual experience, from temperament, discipline, and discovery, no matter what the current fashion may be and most often in opposition to its pressures and rewards.

What I recommend, to the Hopwoods and not quite Hopwoods and future Hopwoods, in your search for that individual achievement, that lifework, is this: the range of tone and implication arising from the ashes of idealism, still charged with passionate feeling which empowers strategies of distance or disinterest, of playfulness or understatement, of disjunction and fragmentation. Let's call it "empirical irony," since it seems to derive not from lack of meaning in the world but from excess and even contradictory meanings. Instead of locating discrepancy between tone and materials, between utterance and evidence, this sort of irony examines the paradoxical doubling uncovered *within* the evidence collected from the world, reinforced by the evidence of the poem; its subtext is less bitterness than heartbreak.

It may dissemble—how can it not, given how little we know or can know, and the inherent ambiguity of language. But unlike the ironic style, its aim is not to conceal or protect but to reveal, recording any glimmer from deep in the well, from Barthelme's place "between mathematics and religion, in which what may fairly be called truth exists." What we find there, in our poems and stories and essays, may be only "a pebble," but when was that ever a bar to the watch we keep?